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CASEY BRIEFING FAILS TO CHANGE SENSE OF CONGRESS

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WASHINGTON

Leaders of Congress, most in dismay and some in disbelief, left what they called a long-overdue briefing on President Reagan's arms deals with Iran even more critical of the secret operation, calling it "a national security disaster."

CIA Director William Casey was sent to Capitol Hill Friday to brief members of the House and Senate intelligence committees on the 18-month operation that has become a major foreign policy and credibility problem for Reagan.

Casey left the private session saying he had not broken the law by failing -- on Reagan's orders -- to previously inform the committees of the covert arms shipments. He also left many lawmakers denouncing the program as a fiasco.

"I find the whole operation was incredibly clumsy and amateurish," Senate Democratic leader Robert Byrd of West Virginia told reporters.

"I think it was ill-conceived and ineptly implemented," said Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., who will chair the Armed Services Committee come January.

"I can't believe what I heard -- and I don't," declared Sen. Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y. "It is hard to believe that such things can be planned."

The displeasure, and lingering disbelief in Moynihan's case of the official explanation, presented more problems for Reagan, who publicly maintained his belief in the "correctness" of the action at his news conference this week.

Reagan insists the arms sales were intended to bolster moderate elements in Iran in anticipation of a future regime and should not be seen as payments for the release of American hostages by pro-Iranian captors in Lebanon.

But Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., outgoing chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, suggested Reagan intended never to inform Congress about the operation, basing his decision on advice from Attorney General Edwin Meese.

"They were willing to trust the lives of hostages to fanatics and at least radicals in Iran and they weren't willing to trust the American people and the Congress of the United States," Durenberger said sharply.

The dealings with Iran began in 1985, and Moynihan said lawmakers were most upset because the National Security Act of 1947 requires the administration to inform Congress "in a timely manner" of such covert actions.

Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., defended Reagan by saying the law is deliberately vague. He said the delay in telling Congress, however, was unwise politically.

"This is not a public relations disaster; this is a national security disaster," argued Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

Monday, Congress will begin open hearings on the shipments of anti-aircraft and armor-piercing missiles and other military equipment to a nation Reagan has condemned as a sponsor of world terrorism. Casey is to testify next month.

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House Democratic leader Jim Wright of Texas, who will become speaker when the 100th Congress convenes in January, told reporters Friday that Iran paid at least \$12 million for the U.S. arms and that U.S. officials knew countries other than Israel were involved in the shipment of weapons.

"It seems clear that those other countries, Israel included, felt they were doing the wishes of the United States," Wright said.

The Boston Herald reported today the administration sold the arms at greatly discounted prices in an effort to skirt other disclosure laws - specifically, the Arms Export Control Act of 1986, which requires all arms sales to foreign nations of more than \$14 million be reported immediately to Congress.

Pentagon sources noted that a single TOW missile is usually sold for \$10,000. and Iran should have paid at least \$20 million just for the 2,000 TOWs it got.